

Turning Green into Gold Five Rules To Winning Client Support for Sustainability

by B. Alan Whitson, RPA

A basic tenet in virtually any profession is “Nothing happens until something is sold.” It doesn’t matter if we’re discussing paint, carpet, office furniture, cleaning supplies or building design, the process of selling is essential to the process of market transformation. Yet a lot of work needs to take place before the sale can be made.

Here are five rules that if followed will speed the process of market transformation:

► Do First Things First

The capability to produce sustainable work is now a prerequisite. The days when an architect or designer could have a client pay for their green education are over. The pool of professionals that have invested in their knowledge, skills and ability is large enough that smart clients are no longer willing to pay for your education. Get better educated. Go to seminars and workshops, and read the latest research – that’s what successful professionals do in every industry.

You don’t need permission to do sustainable work. As the Nike ads say; “Just do it!” More and more designers incorporate sustainable design practices as a normal part of their daily work. This in turn creates demand for environmentally friendly products. One manufacturer recently told me that 2% of the market now drives what the remaining 98% buys.

► Under Promise-Over Deliver

Claims by green-building proponents of increased worker productivity and lower absenteeism have been repeated ad nauseam. Yes, people account for 80% of the cost of doing business and energy costs account for only 6/10^{ths} of 1%. However, if Alan Greenspan and other Wall Street economists cannot agree on how to measure worker productivity, what professional credibility or expertise does an architect or interior designer have to offer on the subject?

On the other hand, I recently meet a facilities manager that obtained LEED-EB certification for his facility. The approval for this project was based on the ability to find, deliver and document energy savings. During this project, they were able to document savings as

measured by reduced worker absenteeism. More important, they were able to identify exactly how that reduction was achieved. By over delivering on his commitments, this facilities manager’s senior executives eager to hear about his new projects whenever he brings them to the table.

► Show Them the Money

Why show them the money? It sells. Absent sufficient value criteria – and very often we don’t know how to clearly show value – price becomes the deciding factor. Basic financial skills are critical to the advancement of green building design. If you don’t have them, then learn by attending appropriate seminars. The workshop series, “**How To Sell Sustainability to Your Client,**” was created for this purpose. Here’s an example of how to deal with the line item mentality of the design and construction business. In one project, spending \$291,000 to upgrade to a thermally superior window was rejected because the projected energy savings offered a payback period of 6.8 years. However, when the impact of using the thermally superior windows on the total construction budget was analyzed using an integrated design approach, a \$1,416,560 savings in first-cost could be realized. This translated into a whopping 487% Return on Investment!

► Acknowledge the Pink Elephant in the Room

There are many benefits to designing, building and operating green buildings. In spite of this, the marketplace doesn’t allocate all of the cost or all of those benefits equally. That’s the pink elephant in the room. Until we acknowledge there is pink elephant in the room and address how to share the costs and benefits equitably the progress of market transformation will be restrained.

Frequently the solution is simple such as negotiating with the landlord for a longer lease term. How about a 10-year lease rather than a 5-year lease term? The landlord then becomes more flexible on TI allowances.

► Cherries and Pits

Clients are like a bowl of cherries. Some are ripe - those that want sus-



tainable design, products and buildings. Others are a little green – given time and some coaching they may want sustainable design, products and buildings but aren’t quite ready. Finally there are the pits – no matter what you say or do they are not interested in sustainability. In dealing with your clients you need to consider two things:

First, as a professional you should give clients the most sustainable project possible that is consistent with their budget and objectives. Failure to do so is a disservice. Notice I didn’t say the project had to be LEED certified, just the most sustainable project possible.

Second, how do you handle each group? Ripe cherries are still rare, but growing in number. Rejoice, do good work and maintain the relationship so you can work on their next project. Green cherries are ripe cherries in training, so treat them as you would ripe cherries. Pits are a wasted effort and most likely nothing will change them. Sometimes you need pits as clients. On the other hand, if you have treated your ripe cherries and green cherries well – someday you may find you don’t need the pits at all.

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This column is published in conjunction with the Corporate Realty, Design & Management Institute and the Center for Sustainable Real Estate. Click on www.squarefootage.net for a seminar schedule, books, and white papers on sustainability and high performance buildings. Alan Whitson’s latest book, *Interior Fit Out – Guidelines for the High Performance & Sustainable Workplace* will be released this Summer. He is the seminar leader for two educational programs, *Interior Fit Out/TI’s: New Rules for 2005* and *How To Sell Sustainability To Your Client*. Information is available at www.squarefootage.net. You can contact Alan Whitson at awhitson@squarefootage.net.

